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SUBJECT: PART 1 OF 3: SCENESETTER FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S APRIL
22 NATIONAL ELECTION

REF: A. PRETORIA 000543

[1](#)B. PRETORIA 000544

PRETORIA 00000664 001.2 OF 005

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR RAYMOND L. BROWN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)
AND (D).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) South Africa on April 22 will hold its fourth national election since the end of apartheid in 1994. From all indications, the government and its institutions are ready for this poll, and turnout is expected to be the highest since former President Nelson Mandela's victory 15 years ago. The election will begin to provide answers to a number of key questions such as whether Mosiuoa Lekota's newly formed Congress of the People (COPE) is a viable opposition, whether the ruling African National Congress (ANC) will hold onto governing the Western Cape, whether the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) will remain relevant in KwaZulu Natal, and whether the tripartite alliance's staunch support of ANC President Jacob Zuma will be vindicated with a resounding victory -- and a better than two-thirds majority in Parliament. However, even as the vote answers a number of key questions, new ones will arise that will set the tone for the new administration. Questions such as whether the ANC President can govern successfully for a full presidential term in the face of wide-ranging corruption charges, whether the ANC will drastically overhaul former President Thabo Mbeki's policies, and whether Zuma and his ANC will soften the party's stance in support of fellow liberation movements will feature prominently in the months ahead. This election, through the questions it answers, will mark a seminal moment in this country's rich history and will speak volumes about where this nation is after 15 years of multi-racial, multi-party democracy. Yet, as the election illuminates where the country is today, the uncertainties that remain will make it hard to say with full confidence where South Africa is going next. This cable is part 1 of 3 on the South African election. End Summary.

From Polokwane in 2007 to Present

[1](#)2. (C) The ANC remains the strongest political party in the country and has dominated the electoral scene since its national congress held in Polokwane in December 2007. In many ways, the political infighting within the ANC over

whether to support Mbeki's bid for a third term as the party's leader or to support the formerly discredited and discounted Zuma colors the prism through which this poll can be viewed. At the congress in Polokwane, Zuma soundly defeated Mbeki for the party presidency with the backing of the ANC's Youth League, the ANC's Women's League, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, and the South African Communist Party. Scholars and political analysts have noted that Zuma's victory came about through the unity of the former Deputy President's allies and attracting those disenchanted by Mbeki's leadership style and direction. After his defeat, Mbeki held onto the South African presidency while the newly-elected, Zuma-allied National Executive Council (NEC), which also was elected at Polokwane, sought to consolidate Zuma's victory. The decision by the National Prosecuting Authority to re-file corruption charges against Zuma days after his electoral victory instantly intensified the polarization between Zuma's and Mbeki's factions within the party. Many ANC supporters accused Mbeki of politically interfering to carry out his grudge against Zuma. While stopping short of declaring him innocent of any crime, Zuma supporters ardently accused Mbeki of fomenting a political conspiracy to "persecute" Zuma with new corruption charges designed to deny his national presidential aspirations. In subsequent months, the NEC led a campaign to realign and purge the party of Mbeki's allies and replace them with Zuma loyalists. At the national, provincial, and local levels, Mbeki's allies were shown the door. This process further polarized the ANC as members coalesced around these two leaders. The ANC's new Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe was positioned by the NEC to take a seat in Parliament, then elevated to the cabinet as a second deputy president with the unofficial portfolio to oversee the smooth presidential transition from Mbeki to Zuma.

PRETORIA 00000664 002.2 OF 005

13. (C) The anxiously awaited start of Zuma's criminal trial in August 2008 was again put on hold as Zuma's legal team filed a petition at the Pietermaritzburg Regional Court. This petition asked that the charges be dropped because the NPA failed to consult with Zuma before re-filing corruption charges in December. Zuma's lawyers further claimed that their client was a victim of a political conspiracy led by the SAG with the goal of precluding Zuma's "rightful" elevation to the state presidency. Legal proceedings were suspended until mid-September when the ruling on Zuma's petition was expected. In the following weeks, the ANC alliance partners -- led by Julius Malema of the ANC Youth League, Blade Nzimande of the South African Communist Party (SACP), and Zwelinzima Vavi of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) -- engaged in a national campaign of direct action and intimidation in Zuma's defense. They declared that: Zuma was innocent until proven guilty; they were prepared to die or kill for Zuma; he was a victim of political persecution; he could not get a fair trial; the courts were corrupted by political influence; those opposed to Zuma's aspirations for national leadership were "counter-revolutionaries" and "would be crushed"; and a political solution (often defined as dropping all charges) should be found for this political trial. Most alarming to South Africans, several leaders of this campaign warned that if Zuma was found guilty, they would make South Africa ungovernable and there would be "blood on the floor."

14. (C) High Court Judge Chris Nicholson's ruling on Zuma's appeal in September 2008 was described as a "political Tsunami" that changed South Africa's political culture. Within ten days, intra-ANC maneuvering resulted in Mbeki being forced to step down just seven months before his second term was to end. The following day, a third of his cabinet resigned in solidarity with him. Three days later, Motlanthe the long serving, well-respected former ANC General-Secretary and new Deputy President, became South Africa's third president in the post-apartheid era. Curiously, for the

first month or so of this unelected tenure, Zuma referred to Motlanthe as the "acting president" until pundits and editorialists pointed out that the constitution did not provide for an "acting" president. In response to that critique, Zuma and NEC leaders have consistently referred to Motlanthe as a caretaker president.

15. (C) Shortly thereafter, a splinter from the ANC, led by former Defense Minister Lekota, emerged. COPE initially attracted many of Mbeki's closest allies into the new breakaway party and has grown substantially since its formation in early November by the defections of primarily alienated and disgruntled life-long ANC members and Mbeki-supporters from the SACP and COSATU. The question then and now remains whether the party could draw in Mbeki himself. So far, the former leader has remained largely on the sidelines while rumors persist that he is a policy consultant for COPE and could publicly join then anytime before the election. Meanwhile, Motlanthe has overseen a steady but lackluster ship since assuming the presidency in September 2008. Political analysts and activists lauded his Cabinet appointments while opposition leaders appeared generally satisfied with many of his decisions such as offering to look into the medical parole of the convicted former Zuma business associate Schabir Shaik. However, Motlanthe -- and especially the newly empowered ANC and alliance -- made it clear when he assumed office that he was not to upstage Zuma or deviate from the ANC leader's agenda. Even at the high mark of Motlanthe's presidency, the State of the Nation address, the South African leader did little to take away from the ANC's agenda or policy plans. His steadfast loyalty and tractability to the ANC has meant a largely smooth ride since Mbeki left office, but also it has meant seven lost months of politically marking time, with no major initiatives implemented from government policy. Indeed, early in the first half of his tenure, he was invited to the White House for an emergency summit on the global financial crises as well as the Davos Economic Summit. He received very favorable press coverage that raised the ire of Zuma supporters who complained the state media was making him look too presidential to the disadvantage of Zuma. In the latter half of his limited tenure, we noted that Motlanthe has not had as many opportunities to be portrayed as more presidential than Zuma, and he has received much less public exposure and press attention as a result.

PRETORIA 00000664 003.2 OF 005

The Candidates: The Most Divisive ANC Leader?

16. (C) Zuma, as leader of the ANC during a period that saw Mbeki forcibly recalled, has had his leadership skills tested as no party leader has before him. Zuma has combined the force of being an affable, dancing bureaucrat with the force of being a popular Zulu to change the face of the ruling party. Yet, University of South Africa professor Dirk Kotze told Poloff last year that "he would hate to be Zuma." Kotze said, "Even though he may be the next leader of the country, he was the man who oversaw the split of the movement." Moreover, Kotze thought the splintering of the ANC with the formation of COPE had more to do with Zuma as an individual than it does with underlying forces within the ANC. Kotze asserted, "The bottom line is that there are many that simply hate Zuma as much as some love him." In the midst of this splintering and anger over the rise of Zuma, the ANC has had to carry forward an election campaign under a caretaker leader, Motlanthe, and under the cloud of a corruption case against the former Deputy President. Many political analysts and pundits question whether the ANC has been wise to risk so much in its dogged pursuit of a Zuma presidency. Yet, the campaign from all appearances has been well-organized, well-funded, and has touched every corner of the country. Zuma has met with the country's traditional leaders and with

Afrikaner, Xhosa, and Zulu community groups. He also has spoken at several of the country's largest churches and synagogues. The ANC has received funding from prominent backers such as Cyril Ramaphosa and Tokyo Sexwale as well as from other businessmen and corporations. Moreover, the Chinese Government and business contacts in eastern Europe and the Middle East reportedly have donated money to the ANC's election efforts. The ANC also has done a solid job of visiting all areas of the country, even if it failed to deliver in all areas. The ANC Youth League last week visited the Afrikaner community of Orania in Northern Cape. Zuma and the party have spared no effort to project a unified, organized campaign. Despite such an effort, questions about Zuma and his ANC remain. What leaders and policy advisers Zuma will rely on after the election, whether the factional polarization that exists in the organization will dissolve after the polls, or whether Zuma will ever face a court case related to charges of corruption, fraud, money laundering, and racketeering probably will not be answered until after April 22. Zuma's leadership will be tested again in the months ahead.

The Candidates: "Let Her Be Our Face"

17. (C) The DA has made no secret of its campaign strategy for this election -- put party leader, and Cape Town mayor, Helen Zille out front. The country's strongest opposition is seeking to build on its 2004 election results of 50 seats (12 percent of the vote), and its strategy is to win Western Cape and then build a strong record of service delivery to win key metropolitan areas in 2011. The party claims to be the "trusted hand" in coalitions and would be open to working with other parties; however, they so far have made no move to align themselves. Zille has consistently told reporters that the DA wants to see how it can do at the polls before committing itself to alliances with other parties. Ryan Coetzee, number one on the DA's Western Cape list, told Cape Town Polloff the DA is happy to work with COPE in a coalition, but would not align themselves with the ANC "because the whole purpose of forming a coalition is to increase democracy by decreasing the ANC's power." Although the DA looks well-positioned to build off of its 2004 and 2006 election performances in Western Cape, it may have difficulty carrying its message forward in other provinces and outside of urban centers for two reasons. First, the decision by Zille to stand as the party's premier candidate -- giving up her seat as Cape Town mayor -- means that there will be essentially two centers of power in the party. Kotze told Polloff on March 27 that her decision to stand as a premier candidate is "baffling and could weaken the party's structures and its ability to show unity in the ranks." Second, although Zille is the face of the party's campaign, most pundits and political analysts see the election as also being about whether the DA's efforts to restructure and bring in new

PRETORIA 00000664 004.2 OF 005

voters -- non-white voters -- have been successful. By-election results in Cape Town suggest that the DA has been somewhat successful tapping into non-white areas, but so far this does not seem to have translated to Johannesburg, Pretoria, or Durban. (Note: The popular perception that the DA is a "white party" undermines its effort to diversify its support base and the ANC opportunistically emphasizes this distinction with claims that the DA wishes to return South Africa to the past of white minority rule. Interestingly, it remains hard to predict where Indian and colored voters' support will fall countrywide in this election. End Note.)

The Candidates: "Tired" and Tested Leadership

18. (C) The IFP may be the opposition party most weakened

since the 2004 election. The party, led by the venerable Mangosuthu Buthelezi, won 28 seats (6 percent of the vote) during that poll. Parliamentarian Eric Lucas told Econoff last year that "10 percent of the vote may be the best case scenario." However, he admitted at the time that even that number may be too high. He pointed to funding as being a key problem for the IFP given that many Durban businesses are throwing their support behind KwaZulu Natal's native son, Zuma. What he did not point to as being a hindrance, but what many political analysts and pundits see as the party's biggest weakness, is the leadership of Buthelezi himself. Showing few signs of slowing down or choosing a successor, Buthelezi seems somewhat disconnected from party efforts to cultivate new, talented leaders. IFP Youth Brigade President Pat Lebenya-Ntanzu told Durban ConGen and visiting Pretoria Poloff that succession within the party is not transparent and that even though the party successfully listed its provincial and national candidates, the political infighting behind the process was "ugly." She expressed concern that the party's leadership failed to understand just how "ugly" the list process was because many of them had shut out those within the party with leadership aspirations. At one point she said that party elders often refer to those within the youth brigade as "kids always asking for things." The party for now remains focused on job creation, health, education, and fighting corruption and its campaign agenda mirrors what its leaders have both pushed publicly and shared with US diplomats in recent months. Although the IFP's agenda may prove attractive to some voters, the party probably will be hindered by the decision to maintain its leadership intact as political analysts and pundits say the IFP needs to deal with succession sooner rather than later.

The Candidates: The First Angry Man

19. (C) What started off with anger directed at the ANC seems to have quieted and turned into a disorganized and badly funded electoral campaign. Some pundits and political analysts initially and optimistically projected that Lekota's COPE could win 50 percent of the vote or more -- drawing key leaders from the ANC all along the way. In recent months, however, those projections have continued to fall. Many political commentators see COPE getting between 25 and 50 seats (or roughly 6 to 15 percent of the vote). The reasons for the decreased expectations are varied and include party factionalism, poor planning, and a lack of funding. First, there are signs of a power struggle between Lekota and Mvumelwana "Mvume" Dandala. Lekota's personal assistant, Tseliso Phomane, told Poloff earlier this year that Lekota's ego was bruised following the party's decision to appoint Dandala as the presidential candidate. Phomane added that factions within the party are strong between those who support Lekota and those who support former Gauteng premier Mbhazima Shilowa. Phomane himself has been accused of being "too much of a Lekota man."

10. (C) The manifestation of such a power struggle is confusion and poor planning. For example, no other political party has campaign posters featuring two different leaders as COPE does with Lekota and Dandala both on party signs across the country. Perhaps the most telling example of poor planning was at a meeting held at the US Embassy with senior COPE leaders. Despite efforts by Poloff and Econoff, representatives both for Lekota and Dandala failed to communicate their attendance or agendas to each other.

PRETORIA 00000664 005.2 OF 005

Lekota was surprised to see Dandala entering the Embassy's elevator and Dandala was equally surprised. Moreover, Lekota spoke at length throughout the meeting, in an obvious effort to keep Dandala from speaking. Third, funding has been an issue. COPE's leadership has been consistent in saying that the party could win Eastern Cape and Limpopo, but admits that

"if we had money we could compete with anyone, but funding has not come fast enough." Funding may have been even harder to come by given the recent global economic crisis, with many South African businesses seeking to stay close to the known quantity of the ANC. COPE already has had an impact in this election -- drawing long-time ANC leaders away from their spiritual and ideological home. Every percentage point that COPE wins is likely to require 160,000 to 170,000 votes. Political commentator Richard Calland notes, "5 percent would be a solid achievement; 10 percent would be remarkable."

LA LIME